



# REPRECINCTING

fair representation in local elections

## **Equity Focus Explained: Factoring Equity into the Town's Reprecincting Process**

The Reprecincting Working Group (RWG) was convened to review census data, prepare draft maps for consideration by the Select Board and support the collection of public comment on the maps and the process to assist the Select Board in their deliberation. Since all communities in Massachusetts are charged to protect minority voting rights, early discussions of the RWG sought to establish a framework to evaluate voting power and the broader concepts of equity and inclusion. Arlington has committed to work on and address equity issues, thus reprecincting must be about more than simply re-balancing population numbers.

This report summarizes the equity approach the RWG took and the reasons for its recommendations. We created a webpage with information about the mapping process and data we used. An interactive map that allows residents to explore the proposed maps and demographic data will be shared on Monday, October 4. In the interim, the appendix to this report provides illustrations of how the various datasets informed the draft maps.

### Background - Equity and Voting Rights

Historically in the United States, discriminatory practices have played a major role in forming many of the systems and policies we have in place today. As we have progressed, laws have been put in place to counter discrimination in many sectors, including housing, employment and voting. When we talk about discrimination, we are referring to the unequal treatment of members of various groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, religion, citizenship status, a combination of those identified, and/or other categories. The RWG has made an effort to take an approach to this reprecincting process prioritizing the needs of ALL voters in town. So when we talk about drawing new boundary lines with an *equity* focus, it means that we are prioritizing *all* voters to ensure that *every* person has fair representation. We are not saying the current system is broken, but we are questioning whether it could be better. The Town is striving to be a welcoming and inclusive community, and improving voter representation is a key step forward in achieving this goal.

Fair outcomes are only achieved when imbalances are corrected, and that means giving a bit more attention to details that have not been considered in the past. In this reprecincting process equity can be defined as the effort to consider the needs of diverse populations within the larger community, and to preserve communities of interest. Community members help to define these communities of interest, which are groups of people who would benefit from being in a single district as they have similar interests and policy concerns. Essentially, the way precinct lines are drawn influences and significantly impacts who *can* run and who *is* elected. We respect the rights of all voters to have equitable opportunities to participate by voting or running for office and to protect minority opinions within each precinct.

### Proposal to Reduce the Number of Precincts

The addition of a secondary proposal to reduce the number of precincts from 21 to 16 added new considerations, some of which are more subjective. Objectively we all agree that the following changes will occur if we choose to adopt 16 precincts:

- Each precinct will elect 15 members to Town Meeting instead of 12
- The total number in Town Meeting will be 240, the target number in the law
- Every registered voter who wishes to represent their precinct must run in the Annual Town Election in April, 2022

The impact of those changes means we will increase each voter's choices on the ballot and decrease the total number of Town Meeting Members (TMMs) from 252 to 240. The RWG believes that electing 15 TMMs gives each resident more say in Town Government. This reduction in precincts or the decrease in the overall size of Town Meeting can in no way be considered or misconstrued with voter disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement is the stripping away of voting rights of citizens, through racist policies like felony disenfranchisement laws and more currently strict voter ID requirements, that disproportionately impact people of color. Precinct reduction in this case would actually give voice and power to more residents who vote.

### Equity Outcomes - 16 v 21 Precincts

By incorporating resident feedback, and using demographic map overlays, the RWG seeks to avoid diluting minority votes. When minority groups are split into small portions divided across precinct boundary lines, ultimately they cannot be a majority or a substantial minority at any point. The RWG is intentionally trying to draw boundary lines that better incorporate minority groups into single precincts so that their votes are actually represented and have power.

Historically, after every decennial census some precincts regularly have been assigned new boundary lines while others never have, which is a bigger issue concerning power, privilege and dominant groups. This actually ties back to the power of Town Meeting Members and the decisions made during Town Meeting around zoning and bylaws that involve housing issues, ultimately impacting areas of town where population growth *can* and *cannot* exist--resulting in consistent population changes in specific areas that then solely bear the burden of having to always reelect Town Meeting Members.

**Mapping Considerations** - There are a number of details the RWG wants to share with residents regarding the new draft maps based on the 2020 Census data. There is a [detailed explanation](#) of the data we considered and an interactive map that allows residents to explore the proposed maps and demographic data will be shared on Monday, October 4. An interactive map that allows residents to explore the proposed maps and demographic data will be shared on Monday, October 4. We have not requested maps drawn by the Secretary of State based on the 2020 Census because their maps only adjust for population changes and do not include an analysis of the impact of their proposed boundary lines based on racial, economic, or local housing data.

The RWG began the mapping process by making the decision not to use Mass Ave as a dividing line when drawing proposed maps, because the people who live near Mass Ave on both sides of the street are similar to each other. The precincts that span Mass Ave have more uniform demographic profiles. The goal is for those precincts to elect representatives to Town Meeting who speak to policy and zoning issues from that shared perspective of living in typically denser neighborhoods. The RWG's initial approach results in changes to the boundaries for all precincts for both the 16-precinct and 21-precinct maps. This created an immediate tension between an option supported by some Town Meeting Members to maintain 21 similar precincts to change the fewest precincts possible and maps that we felt followed the data.

The RWG started fresh with the 2020 census data and was able to compare the outcomes of 21 and 16 precincts based on the same data. The slightly larger precincts in a 16-precinct model require fewer divisions of natural neighborhoods and better achieve the goal of neither diluting nor "packing" the votes and voices of residents across the range of available data. Calls for a map that preserves 21 precincts because smaller groupings better represent special interests at the neighborhood level may seem reasonable, but the data does not support that argument.

**Town Meeting Elections** - Electing all TMMs in one election concerns some residents. However, if we draw maps that start with the data and not the current lines, all boundary

lines are impacted. The RWG disagrees with the argument to minimally modify our current 21 precincts for two reasons. First, we believe the RWG maps make important changes based on the demographics. Second, a minimum change map creates disparities in the impact of the process when only some residents and some TMMs are affected.

Some residents have noted the expense of running for Town Meeting should be an argument for making as few changes to the precinct map as possible, however asking only a portion of TMMs to run again is clearly less equitable than asking all TMMs to run again. And the wide-open nature of reseating all TMMs may encourage residents to run for election for Town Meeting who otherwise might feel daunted running against four long-serving incumbents.

**Number of Town Meeting Seats** - Reducing the number of Town Meeting Members from 252 to 240 concerns residents who believe it reduces representation overall and places a greater burden on individual TMMs to represent more people over a larger geographic area. The RWG feels its top priority is a map that is best for the most residents and carefully considers the boundary lines based on demographic data. The RWG believes the benefits of the 16 precinct map are real. Losing 12 Town Meeting seats and increasing the geographic size of the precincts are adjustments that should not outweigh the value to residents of a map that reflects neighborhoods and maximizes voting rights and potential for representation to the greatest extent possible.

**Neighborhoods and Polling Locations** - The RWG draft maps are the result of a different approach to drawing precinct boundaries, which in most cases means that the proposed precincts more accurately group similar neighbors. Two precincts that currently both combine single-family and two-family neighborhoods might now be drawn as one largely single-family and another largely two-family. People often think of their precinct as their natural neighborhood, but if we look just at the data (which could be different from 10 or 20 years ago) we can see that some current precincts group residents with different interests, which could let one set of perspectives have more voice in Town Meeting depending on who runs and gets elected. That's why the state requires all municipalities to undergo the reprecincting process every 10 years: to provide a mechanism for evaluating potential negative impacts to precinct composition.

Although the RWG is not specifically recommending polling locations, some consideration was made regarding possible locations and the burden of travel for residents of different neighborhoods to likely polling locations. From an equity standpoint, grouping similar residents on either side of Mass Ave was prioritized over preserving that dividing line. Polling locations along the transportation corridors are

more likely to improve access to polling locations for residents, which would be a more equitable outcome. Likewise we can anticipate that the majority of voters in a low-density and high-income precinct could travel into the center of town more easily. The Town through the Council on Aging and the League of Women Voters of Arlington has and will continue to work to assist those in need of transportation to get to the polls.

The goal when applying an equity focus to the reprecincting process is to improve voter experience for all, and promote fair elections. Reshaping the precinct map gives not only an opportunity for community input regarding natural neighborhood boundaries, but also a chance for the overall demographics of the Town to be considered along with the impact that boundary lines will have on specific communities. The 16 precinct Town map provides every voter with more representation, accounts for increases in population over time, and gives residents an equal opportunity to run for Town Meeting.

**In Summary** - equity considerations led to:

- Completely new maps based on demographic data
- A recommendation to impact all precincts equally

When choosing between 21 and 16 precincts we concluded that 16 precincts:

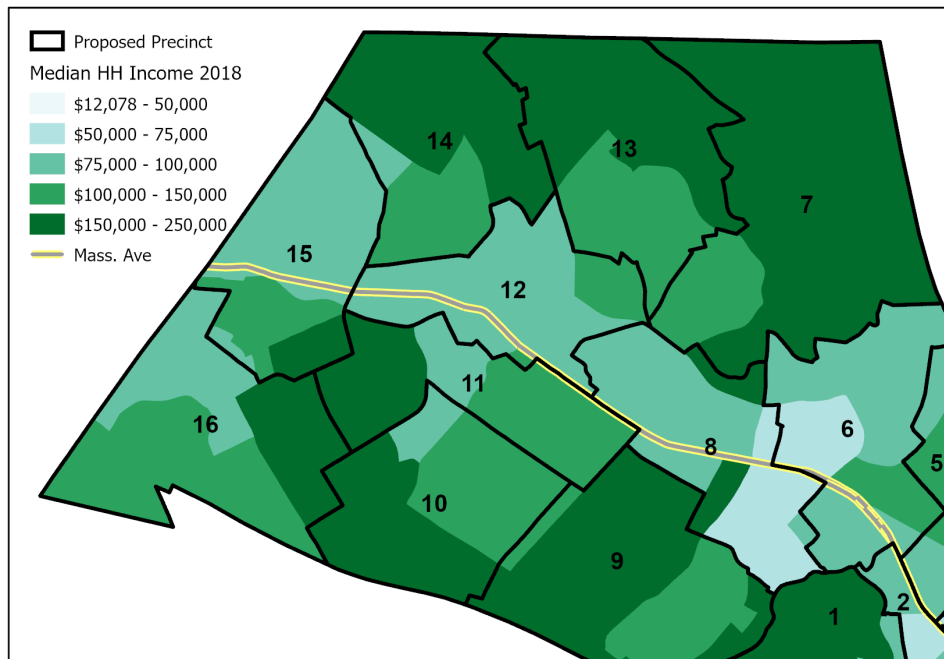
- Created fewer awkward lines that could divide minority groups
- Increased the likelihood that minority voices could be elected to Town Meeting which outweighed the loss of 12 representatives
- Simplified election planning by equally distributing precincts per polling location and reducing overhead somewhat

## **Appendix: Examples of equity-related decisions in mapping precinct boundaries for the 16 Precincts map**

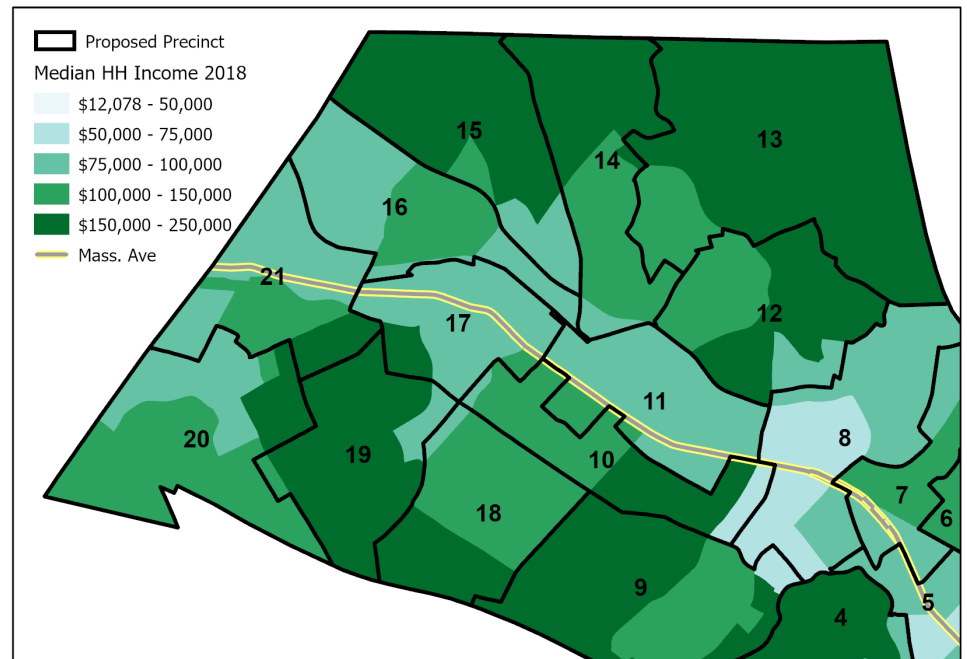
No one map can successfully or perfectly account for every variable, nor was there a single algorithm the RWG applied in drawing the precinct maps. We looked for a preponderance of demographic similarities within the state requirement to balance each precinct's total population.

### **Median Household Income: 2018 ACS, Census Block Groups**

The American Community Survey reports median household income at the Block Group level, which encompasses broad areas that are sometimes larger or different than Arlington's perceived neighborhoods. Looking at median household income in the western side of Arlington, you can see variation between the Block Groups nearest Mass Ave where there are also more apartments, condos, and overall higher density of housing units, than further away from Mass Ave. where our single family residential areas dominate.



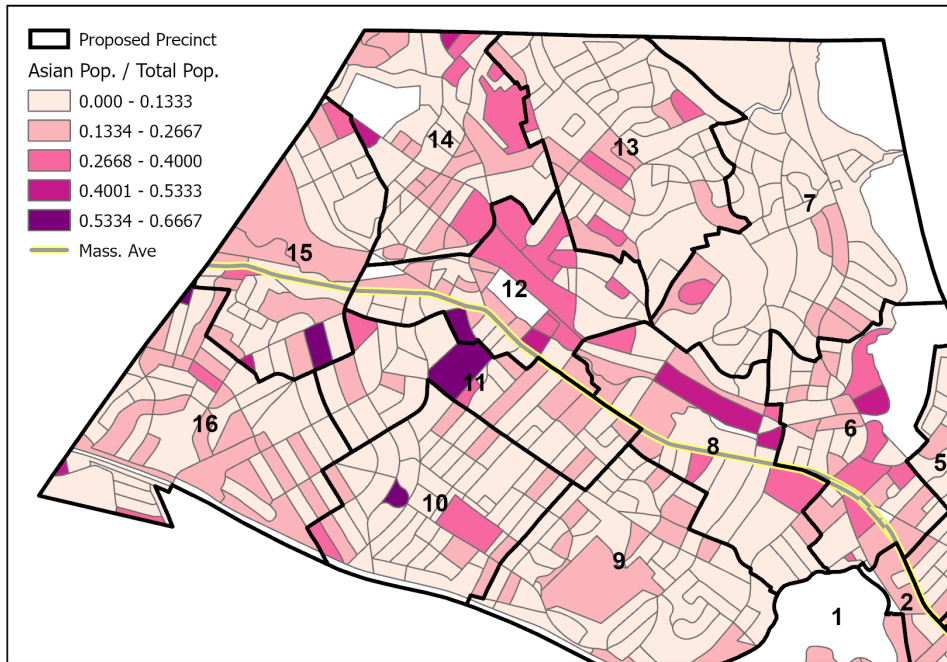
**Proposed 16 Precincts Map: Median HH Income Underlay**



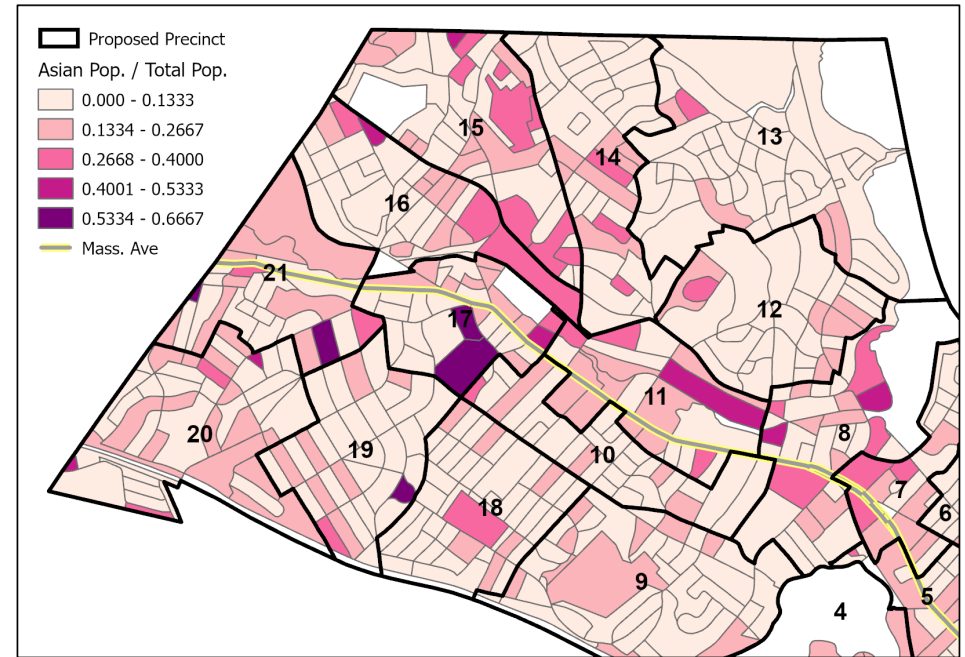
**Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Median HH Income Underlay**

### Race: 2020 Census, Census Blocks

Data on race is included in the 2020 Census Redistricting Data, aggregated to the Census Block level, i.e. smaller geographies than Census Block Groups, allowing us to analyze the data at a more geographic detail. Asians represent Arlington's most populous non-white group (12.2% of Arlington's total population). The data highlights that there is a greater proportion of Asian residents in the west side of Arlington; the Asian community is also clustered nearer to Mass Ave and also throughout the lower and higher Household Income areas shown in the previous maps.

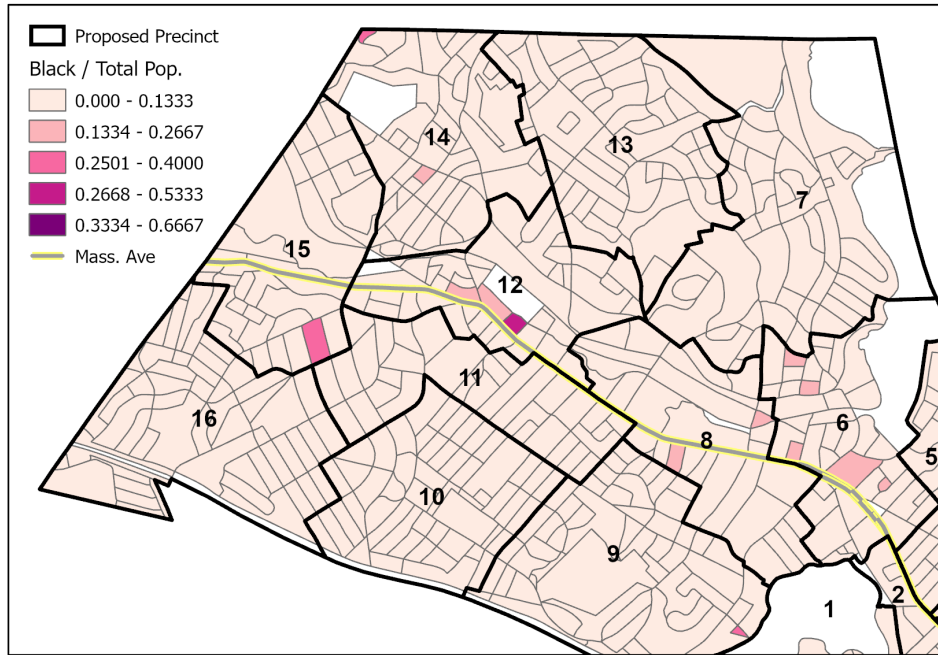


Proposed 16 Precinct Map: Asian Population Underlay

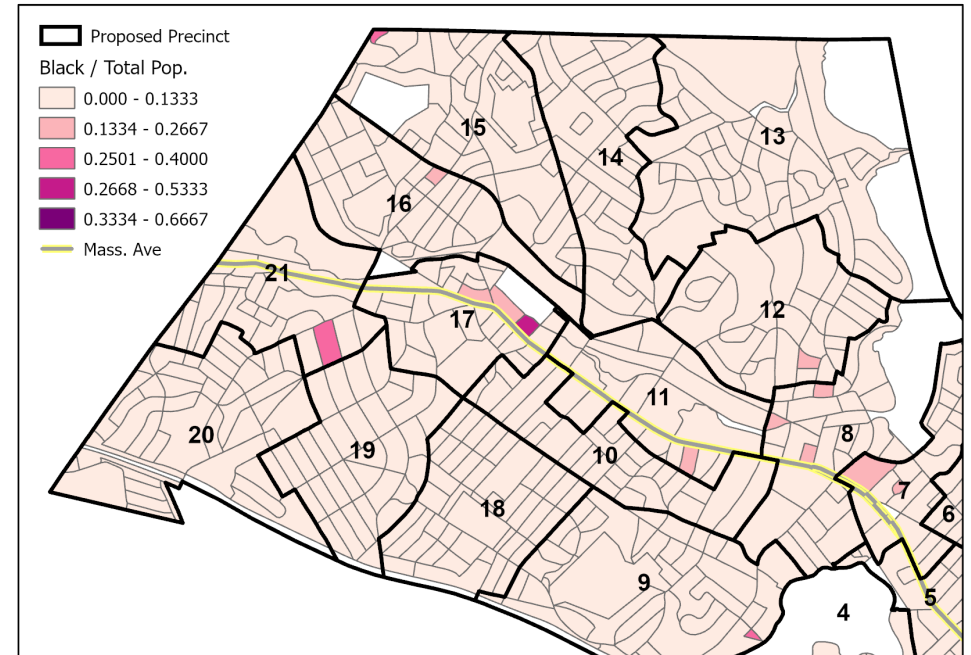


Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Asian Population Underlay

A map of Arlington's Black population (approximately 2.3% of all Arlington residents), shown at the same ratio (map classification) as the Asian population map, shows a smaller overall population, largely concentrated along the Mass Ave corridor.

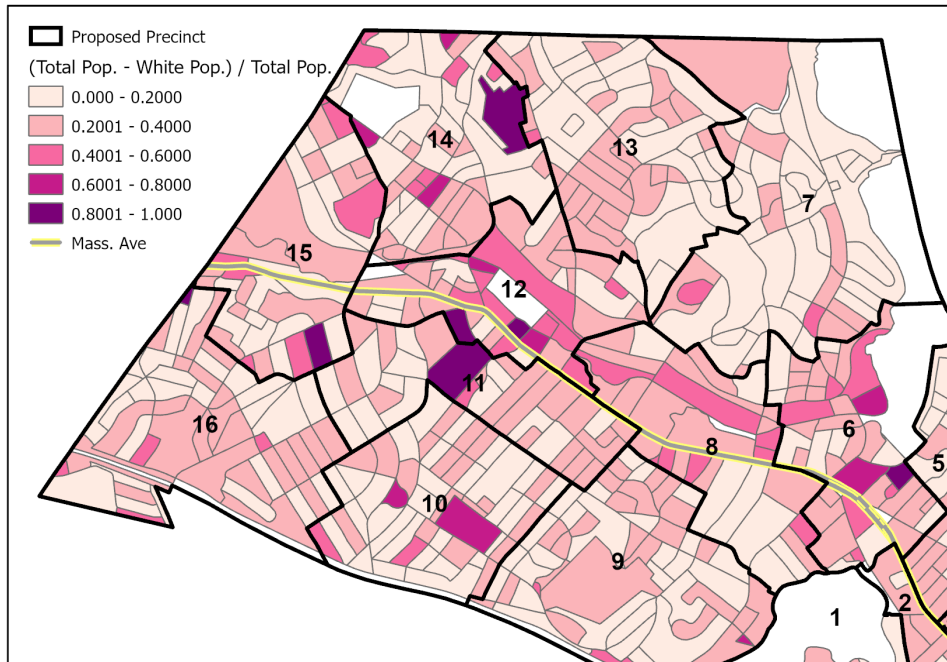


**Proposed 16 Precinct Map: Black Population Underlay**

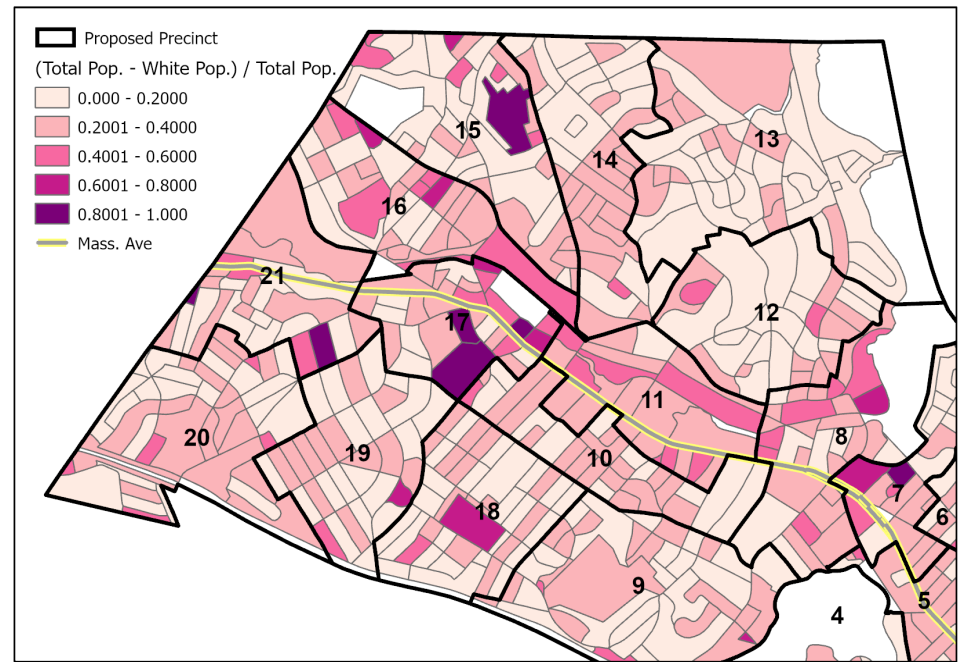


**Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Black Population Underlay**

Looking at the total non-White population (calculated by subtracting our White population from our total population to ensure we understood our complete population of people of color) again highlights recognizable differences within proximity to Mass Ave.



**Proposed 16 Precinct Map: Non-White Population Underlay**

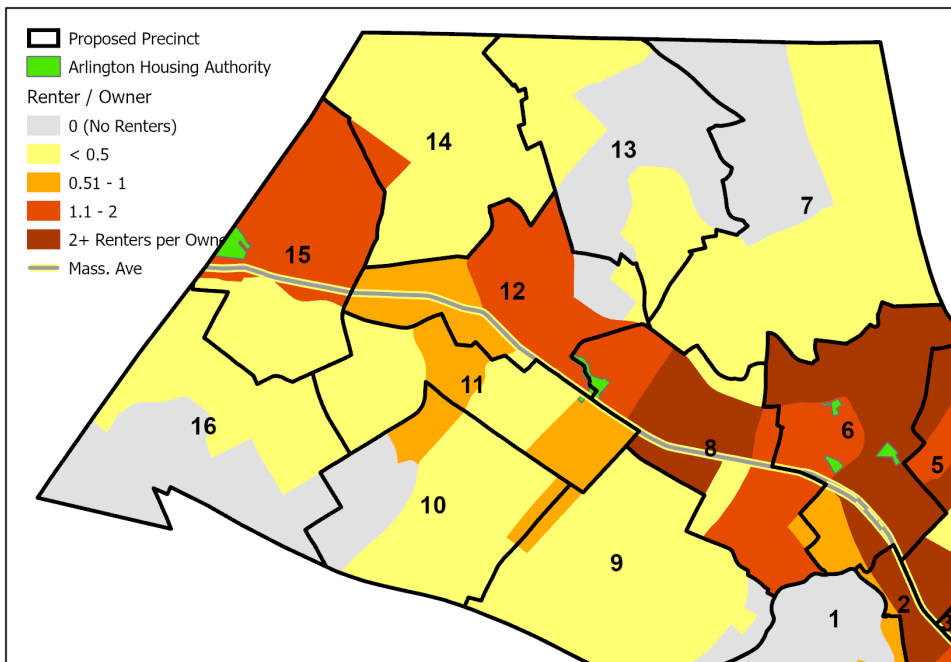


**Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Non-White Population Underlay**

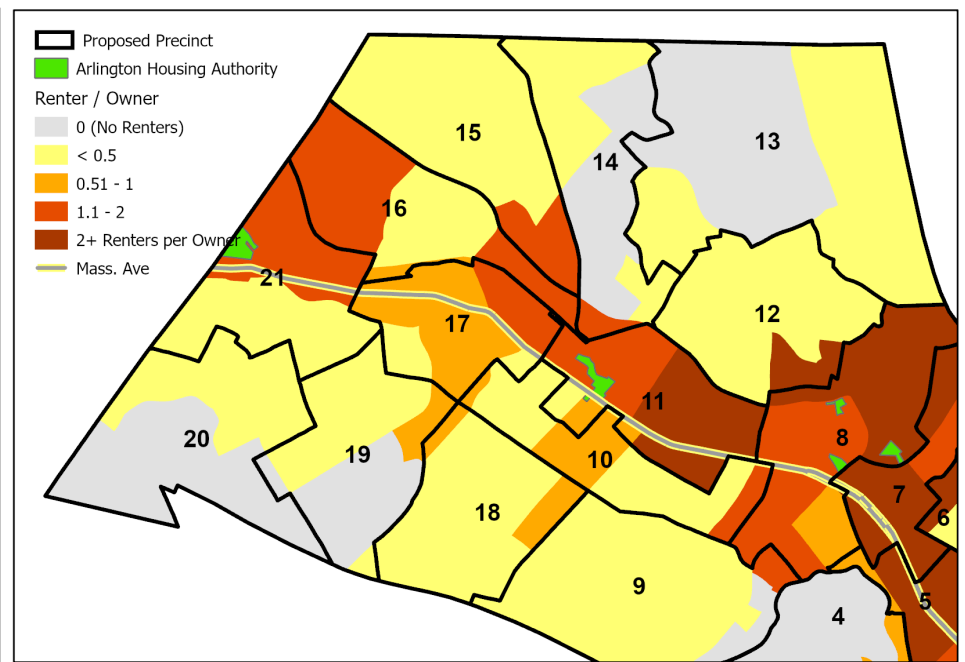
### Renter vs. Owner Occupied Housing Units: 2018 ACS, Census Block Groups

The Renter vs. Owner (tenure) data is available through the American Community Survey and aggregated to the Census Block Group level, which encompasses broad areas sometimes larger or different than Arlington's perceived neighborhoods.

We added to these maps the parcel locations of the Arlington Housing Authority properties, which are also rental units. The data shows a greater number of renter occupied units along the Mass Ave corridor, which is due to the apartment complexes and multi-family buildings along the Mass Ave corridor compared to the single-family, primarily owner occupied homes in Arlington's single-family residential zoning districts.



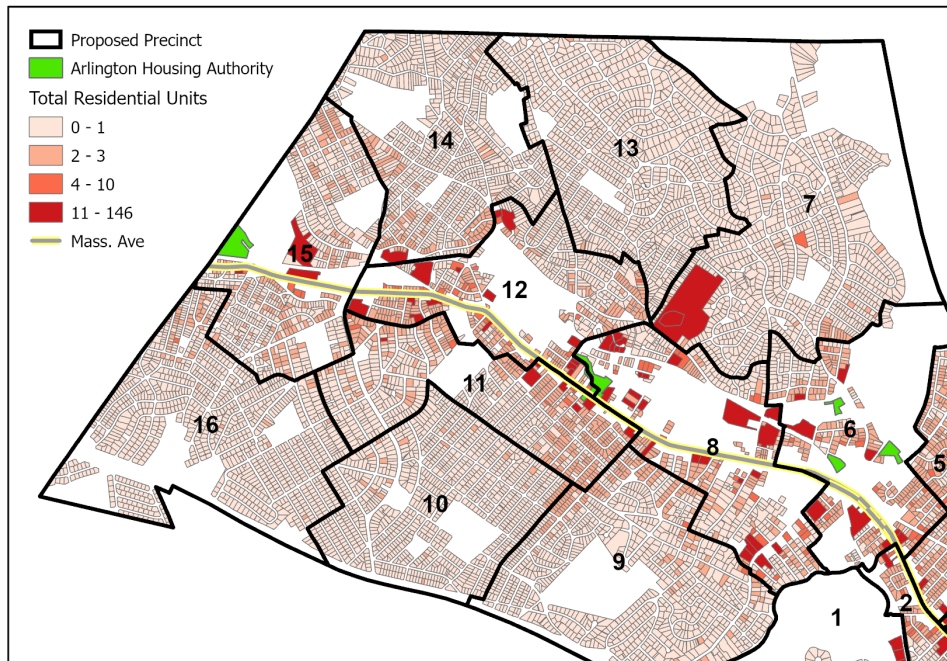
Proposed 16 Precinct Map: Renter to Owner Ratio



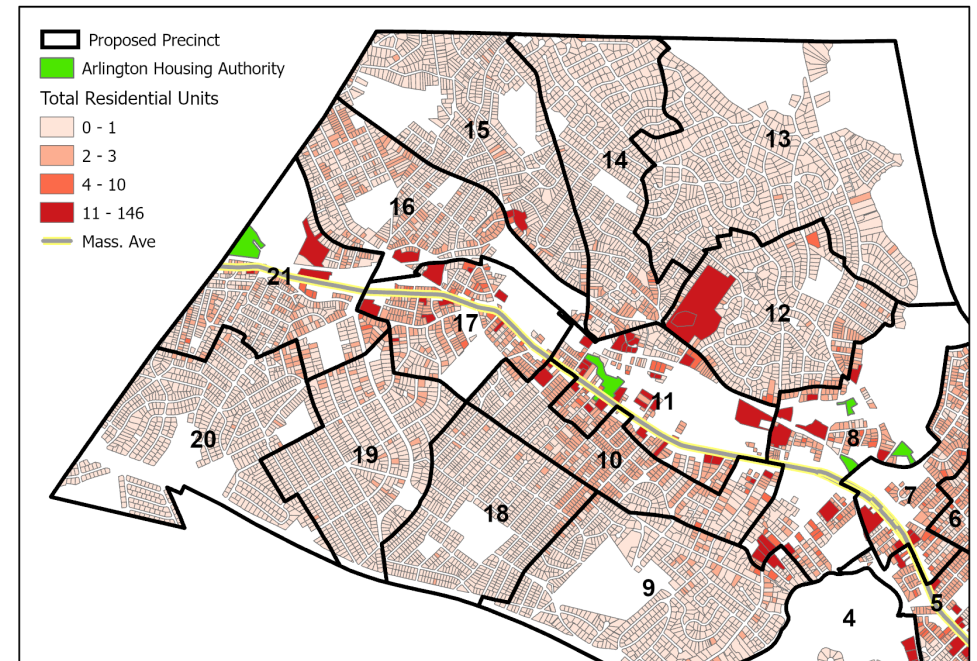
Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Renter to Owner Ratio

### Residential Units Per Parcel: 2021 Assessor database, Parcel

To further enhance our understanding of housing trends, we mapped the number of residential units by parcel. This provided insight into housing density at neighborhood level by allowing us to see the distribution of multi-unit buildings town wide. This data helped us delineate the Mass Ave corridor and draw precincts around areas of higher and lower density of residential units more fairly. The blank/white areas in the map below are either parks or non-residential parcels as categorized using the State Dept of Revenue's Land Use Codes.



Proposed 16 Precinct Map: Residential Units Per Parcel



Proposed 21 Precinct Map: Residential Units Per Parcel